





The Quest

Culhwch and Olwen, in the cycle of medieval tales, known as The Mabinogion, is the earliest Arthurian tale in Welsh. This Arthur is not the gracious king of later tradition, but a powerful Celtic ruler, whose authority and magnetism are implicit in his own behaviour, and that of his followers who comprise his war band as much as his court.

The plot is pure folk tale. Culhwch's step mother vows he will never marry till he wins Olwen, the daughter of Ysbyddaden Chief Giant, who imposes on him forty seemingly impossible tasks, because he knows that he himself must die when his daughter marries.

On his father's advice, Culhwch goes to seek help from his kinsman, King Arthur, who pledges his help, and appoints six of his most magically endowed warriors to go with Culhwch to seek out Ysbyddaden, and ask for the hand of Olwen. After several foiled attempts to kill them, Ysbyddaden makes his bargain with Culhwch: '*When I get what I shall name to you, then shall you get my daughter.*' And he lists the forty tasks.

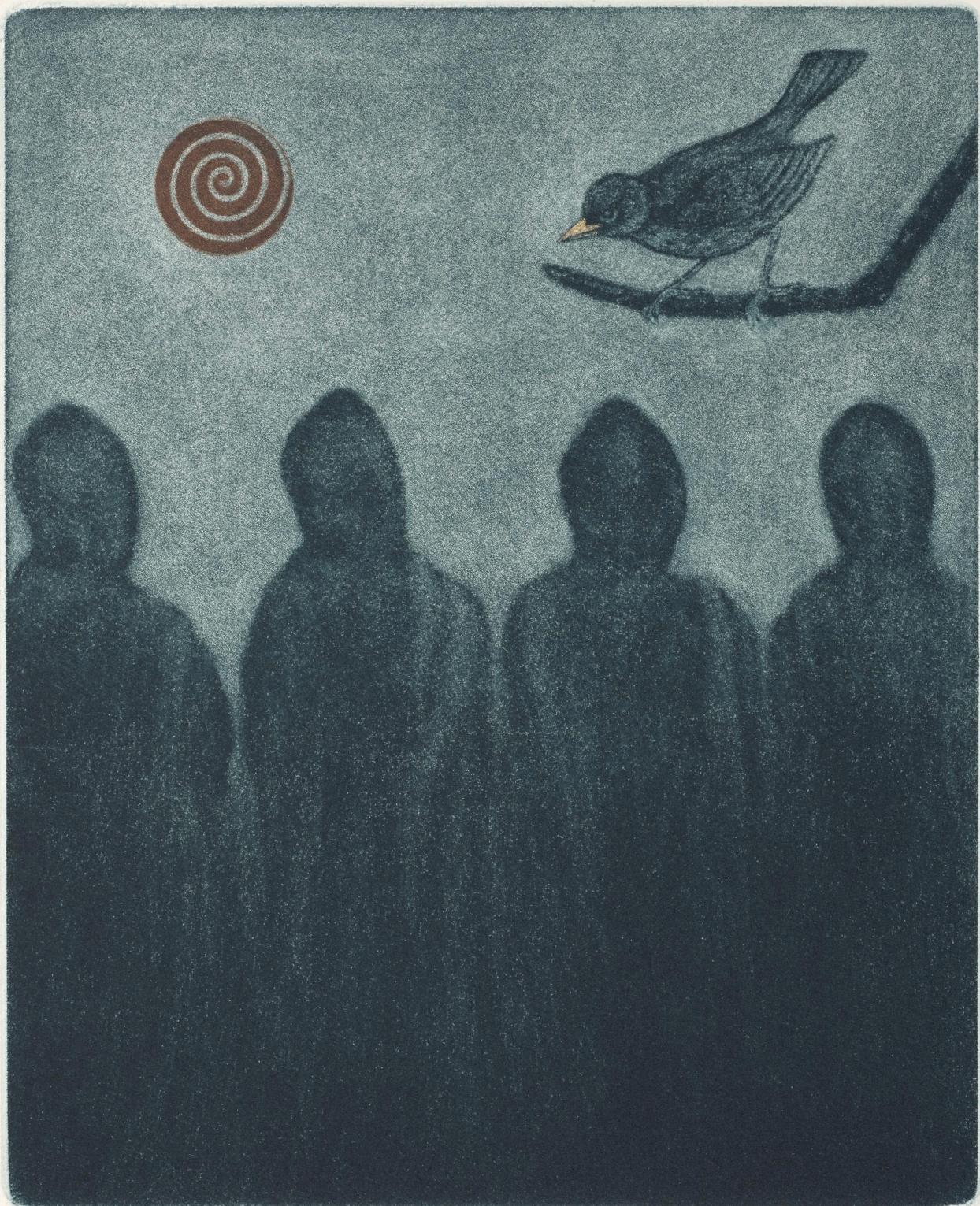
The youth's response is significant: '*Arthur, my lord and kinsman, will get me all of those things. And I will get your daughter, and you will lose your life.*' For Culhwch plays no further part in fulfilling the tasks, until the very end, when he triumphantly arrives at the court of Ysbyddaden, with the wonders, hard-won by Arthur and his warriors, and claims the giant's daughter, before beheading him.

Arthur is initially involved in the first task, which is the search for Mabon, son of Modron, but is then urged by his men, '*Lord, go home. You cannot go with your host to seek such petty things as these.*' This is the first of repeated references in the following tale to the exalted status of Arthur, who accordingly sends on his behalf, Gwrhyr Interpreter of Tongues, the equally magically endowed Cai and Bedwyr, and the newly freed Eidol, Mabon's kinsman – and therefore fitting that he should go too.

Sioned Davies, in the superb annotations to her translation of The Mabinogion, comments that this tale of the oldest animals has parallels in Indian and Persian literature, as well as in a Welsh triad, and identifies probable locations based on the creatures' place names. This quest, it seems, ranged from Gwynedd, in north west Wales, to a tidal lake on the Severn Estuary, in the south east. It is an episode of great poetic beauty, the storyteller heightening the colour and deepening the character of the creatures we meet.

'Go then for me on this quest,' King Arthur commands.
And the tale begins...

They travelled until they came to the Ouzel of Cilgwri. 'For God's sake', Gwrhyr asked her, 'do you know anything of Mabon son of Modron, who was taken when three nights old from between his mother and the wall?' The Ouzel said, 'When I first came here, there was a smith's anvil here, and I was a young bird. No work has been done on it except by my beak every evening. Today, there is not so much of it as a nut, that is not worn away. God's vengeance on me if I have heard anything about the man you are asking after. Nevertheless, whatever is right and proper for me to do for Arthur's messengers, I will do. There is a kind of creature God made before me; I will go there as your guide.'



*They came to where the Stag of Rhedynfre was.
‘Stag of Rhedynfre, we have come to you here, Arthur’s messengers, since we know no animal older than you. Tell us, do you know anything of Mabon son of Modron who was taken away from his mother when he was three nights old?’*

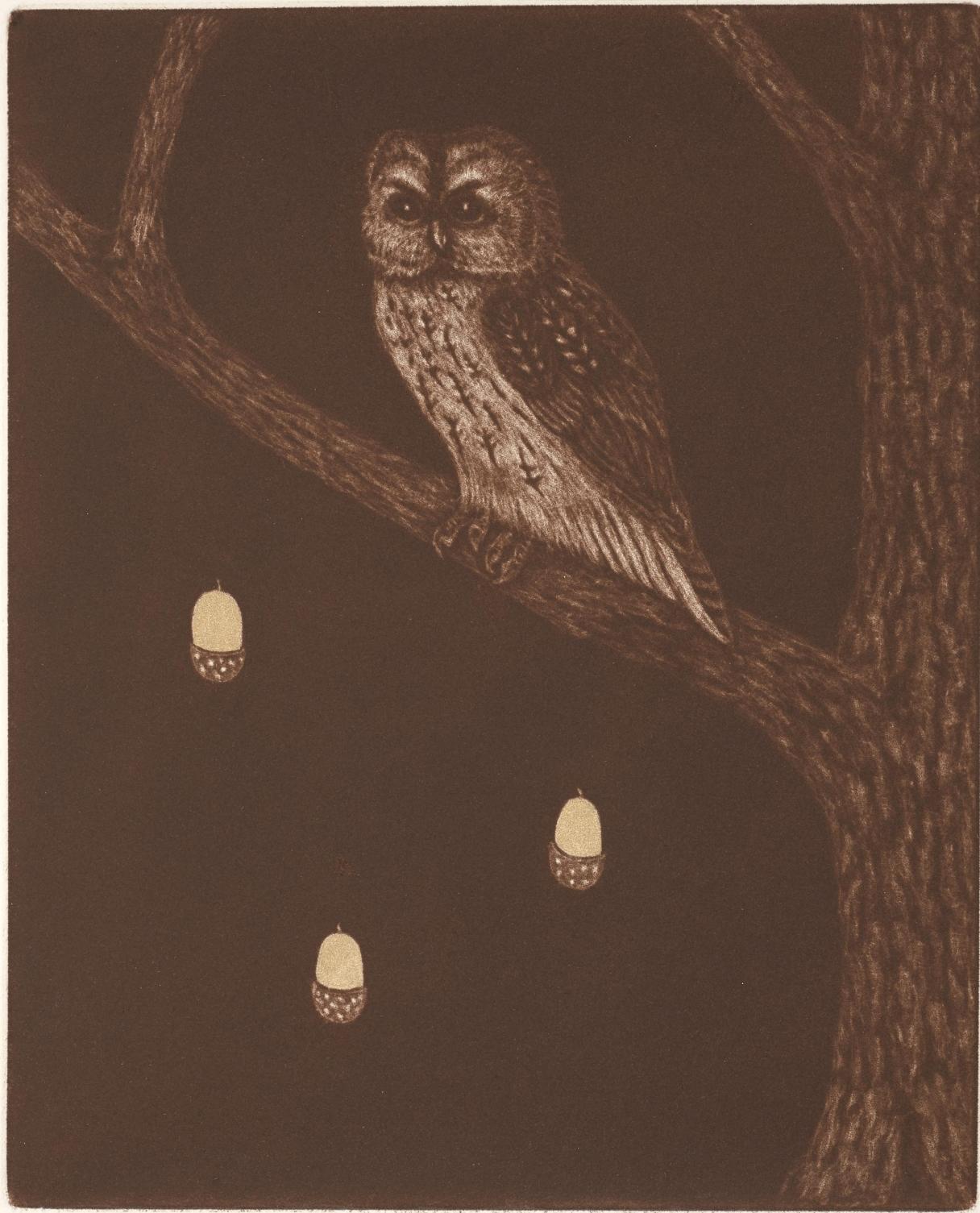
The Stag said, ‘When I first came here, there was but one antler on either side of my head, and there were no trees here, except a single oak sapling, and that grew into an oak with a hundred branches. And the oak fell in time, and today nothing remains of it but a red stump. From that day to this I have been here. I have heard nothing of the one you are asking after. Nevertheless, since you are Arthur’s messengers, I shall be your guide to where there is an animal God made before me.’



*They came to the place where the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd
was.*

*'Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, here are Arthur's messengers.
Do you know anything of Mabon son of Modron, who
was taken away from his mother when three nights old?'*

*'If I knew anything, I would say. When I first came
here the great valley that you see was a wooded glen,
and a race of men came there, and it was laid waste.
And a second wood grew there, and this wood is the
third. And as for me, the roots of my wings are mere
stumps. From that day to this I have heard nothing of
the man you are asking after. Nevertheless I shall be a
guide to Arthur's messengers until you come to the oldest
animal in this world, and the one who has roamed
furthest — the Eagle of Gwernabwy.'*



The Eagle said, ‘I came here a long time ago, and when I first came here I had a rock, and from its top I would peck at the stars every evening. Now it is not a hand-breadth in height. From that day to this I have been here, and I have heard nothing about the man you are seeking. But once I went to seek my meat as far as Llyn Lliw, and when I came there, I sank my claws into a salmon, thinking he would be meat for me for many a long day, and he pulled me down into the depths, so that I barely got away from him. And I and all my kinsmen went after him to try to seek to destroy him. But he sent messengers to make peace with me, and he himself came to me, to have fifty tridents taken out of his back. Unless he knows something about what you seek, I do not know anyone who might. Nevertheless I will be your guide to where he is.’



They came to the place where he was.

The Eagle said, ‘Salmon of Llyn Lliw, I have come to you with Arthur’s messengers to ask if you know anything of Mabon Son of Modron, who was taken away from his mother when he was three nights old?’

‘As much as I know I will tell. With every flood tide I travel up the river until I come to the bend in the wall of Caer Loyw; and there I found such distress, that in my life I never found its equal. And so that you will believe me, let one of you come on my two shoulders.’

And Cai and Gwrhyr Interpreter of Tongues went upon the Salmon’s two shoulders, and they travelled until they came to the far side of the wall from the prisoner, and they could hear lamenting and wailing on the other side of the wall from them.

Gwrhyr said, ‘Who is lamenting in this house of stone?’

‘Alas sir, he who is so cruelly imprisoned here has cause to lament. It is Mabon Son of Modron.’



The Quest is to find the whereabouts of the prisoner, Mabon son of Modron, in Mabinogion's 'Culhwch and Olwen'. King Arthur's appointed messengers are helped in turn, on their quest, by the oldest animals, portrayed in full-page mezzotints, with gilding, one combined with deeply-bitten etching, by Shirley Jones. Each of the 5 animals is introduced by its own story. These, and the general introduction, were written, set and printed, letterpress, by her, in 18 point Baskerville typeface, on Somerset mouldmade paper, with Rakusi Veil interleaving.

The cloth-covered solander boxes are lined with Amate hand-made paper, and foil-blocked with a Celtic spiral at Ludlow Bookbinders.

In an edition limited to 24 copies, this is copy 22

Shirley Jones '15



